

Tameside MBC Fostering Services

Inspection report for LA Fostering Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Tameside MBC (Metropolitan Borough Council) has a dedicated Family Placement Service, which is managed by the Unit Business Manager for Looked After Children. Their main purpose is to provide a diverse range of carers to cater for the needs of looked after children in Tameside and, in partnership with other sectors, to ensure the best outcomes for the young people. The team recruits, assesses, supervises and supports foster carers and is responsible for ensuring that their training needs are met. Services offered by the team include emergency placements, task centred placements, long term or permanent carers and respite care placements. The service is also responsible for kinship carers, and works with the disability team for respite placements for children with disabilities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

At this announced full inspection, all key standards were inspected. This is a good service with some outstanding outcome areas for children. Health, education and life skills are promoted and young people are consulted and included in decision making. Foster carers demonstrate a high commitment to supporting children to maintain positive contact with their families. The service is child focussed and safeguards children's welfare. Foster carers, managers and staff are largely effectively and efficiently managed and supported by the administration team. Systems for quality assurance could be more robust. A wide range of training opportunities are available and foster carers are encouraged to attend with varying degrees of success.

Improvements since the last inspection

Placement planning meetings, at which foster placement agreements are compiled, are chaired by one of the managers and are taking place. Records of supervisory visits to foster carers have been revised and better demonstrate that young people's needs are being met. Foster carers are now provided with more information about young people's histories and needs. The service continues to encourage foster carers to take up training and provides a range of learning experiences for them. The manager has an effective system in place for monitoring allegations, complaints and outcomes for children in foster care. The functioning of the panel has improved and roles are clear. Personnel files for staff have been reviewed and contain all the necessary information.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The service can demonstrate that foster carers are informed about children's health histories, are meeting their needs and are promoting healthy living. Specialist health services are accessed as necessary and children and young people have regular medical, optical and dental checks.

The fostering service works with the Looked After Children (LAC) nurse to ensure that all children have a named health worker who will carry out health assessments. The LAC nurse is also involved in training and a range of events which serve to equip foster carers to work with children and young people to promote healthy living. Information on children's health is provided by foster carers for statutory reviews. Records of medication and health appointments are kept by foster carers and these are monitored at supervisory visits by the fostering social workers. Independent reviewing officers are active in ensuring that young people's health needs are met.

On all files children's health needs are outlined and there is evidence of the service working to gain information where it is not immediately available, for example, on children's immunisations.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The manager and staff are suitably qualified and experienced. Where foster carer assessments are carried out by workers who are not qualified or experienced to do so, they are supervised by an appropriate person.

Personnel files have been reorganised and contain checklists which are signed off by the manager when completed. Verification of references is not always noted on the file, although there is a system in place to ensure they are carried out. A database is used to alert the service when staff and foster carer Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are due to be updated. A single file is kept for panel members which contains information about people no longer on panel and which does not contain all the necessary information. A policy is in place regarding checks on foster carers but differing practice concerning references from employers and ex-partners is evident.

Staff have had further training in assessment and have group supervision. Standards of assessments are improving. Foster care homes are suitable for children and are mainly inspected annually. A health and safety assessment is carried out prior to approval and updated only at unannounced visits. Where deficits are identified there are no follow up actions to monitor these nor are the assessments and safe caring policies revised when the age range of children placed changes. Unannounced visits are now carried out annually.

Similarly, foster carers have their own written safe care policies and there is little

evidence of reviewing to reflect changes, or to confirm that the policy is still appropriate. It is evident that foster carers mainly use encouragement and reward to manage young people's behaviour. Their strategies are monitored on supervisory visits. Training on anti-bullying strategies, child protection and safeguarding and first aid is available and foster carers are encouraged to attend.

It is evident that careful matching is considered when the team receive a referral. The placement request form has been changed in order to capture more information from social workers and allow for children to be placed in foster homes which best meet their needs. Breakdown rates remain low and the manager is undertaking a review of the reasons for disrupted placements to inform the service's practices. There is an established practice of recruiting carers who are flexible in their skills and willing to change their status. This results in children being able to remain with carers they know rather than moving placements when they need permanent rather than temporary foster care. Proper procedures are in place to match children for permanent care which includes matching meetings.

The procedures for arranging and monitoring the use of external foster placements are appropriate and serve to safeguard children. The placements officer has strong links with the fostering services and assists workers when outside placements are needed. He keeps a database of information about independent fostering agencies which is constantly updated.

Placement meetings, which include involved professionals and parents, are held within a week of a child being placed and these have been formalised and are now chaired by the manager or assistant manager. Foster placement agreements are compiled at this meeting and have improved in content and quality. Although this strategy is still under review, positive comments were made by fostering social workers and foster carers and the manager reports that parents say that they feel more involved. They are attended by the education resource team, workers from the contact centre and others involved in children's lives.

The role of the fostering manager at panel has been clarified and a decision-making policy is in place. The agency decision maker meets regularly with the panel chair. A panel administrator takes minutes and these are signed off at the subsequent meeting by the chairperson. There is evidence of close scrutiny of information and in-depth discussion in panels which have all been quorate and properly constituted.

A panel meeting was observed and it is evident that there is effective scrutiny of information and recommendations are made following in-depth, child centred discussion with all members participating. The chairperson and panel members bring a wealth of relevant experience and have a clear quality assurance role. Panel training has been provided and an annual report compiled. Minutes reflect the discussions and outline the clear reasons for panel recommendations.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service values diversity. All the social work teams in Tameside have a nominated equalities representative to raise awareness and all staff receive equality and diversity training and cultural competence in assessments. There is also a well established user involvement team which works from the same building as the fostering service and which has specific responsibility for championing the corporate equality agenda.

The service can demonstrate that educational achievement is promoted and that children and young people are accessing appropriate education. The fostering team works with the Education Resource Team to monitor attendance and achievement and supports foster carers in enhancing children's opportunities. Many young people have achieved 100% attendance and some have received educational awards. There is provision for tutors to be provided when appropriate. Foster carers attend Personal Education Plan meetings as does the education link worker. Training has been provided for foster carers including transfer from primary to secondary school, involving young people, 14-19 curriculum and reading support. A strong policy on inclusion of children with disabilities is evident.

The short break service has now moved to the disability teams whose managers meet regularly with the fostering service manager, and the worker keeps links with the team in terms of practice issues. The panel considers assessments of short break carers. This arrangement is said to be working well with clearer levels of accountability.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes contact arrangements for children and young people. Foster carers are prepared and trained for high levels of contact and demonstrate a commitment to supporting the arrangements, sometimes supervising the contact. Where this happens they are clear about their role and about information they need to provide to social workers. Training is provided, including a workshop which aims to promote and support positive contact. Tameside has a contact centre and workers there attend planning meetings and provide information for reviews.

The service is committed to consulting with foster carers, parents and children and including them in the development of the service. Where appropriate, foster carers advocate on behalf of young people. Young people contribute to their reviews and planning meetings where possible and examples were given where their wishes were listened to and acted upon. Young people are involved in foster carer training and staff interviews and have contact with the Children's Rights Service.

Foster carers are consulted about changes and developments of the service, a forum

is held regularly as are other events which allow for consultation. A complaints policy is in place and the service can demonstrate that they are dealt with appropriately and in a timely manner.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are prepared for adulthood and encouraged to develop age-appropriate life skills. Examples were given where foster carers supported young people to move to independent living. The manager has identified the need for a piece of work to be done with foster carers in respect of the role of the Leaving Care Team. Foster carers have been provided with training on independence skills and pathway planning.

The administrative team ensure that foster carers are paid in a timely manner and allowances and expenses are clearly set out in writing.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has an up to date statement of purpose which outlines its aims and objectives and the services provided. The fostering service is well managed by people with appropriate skills and experience who provide effective support, supervision and training for staff. The role of the assistant team manager has been clarified and it is evident that the service is well managed. Staff have regular supervision sessions and team meetings. Annual appraisals are carried out.

The staff team is largely stable and has a wide range of experience and skills in working with foster carers to improve outcomes for young people. Administrative support has improved and provides a valuable service, particularly in the last year when the move to electronic records has been implemented. Roles of individual workers are clear and the team is effectively managed.

The majority of foster carers are satisfied with the support, supervision and training they receive. Fostering social workers have recently revised their recording of supervisory visits to demonstrate improved monitoring of outcomes for children. This is a continuing development area and at present the records are variable. Foster carer reviews are carried out annually and comprehensive reports are compiled which outline skills and training needs.

A range of relevant training is provided for staff and foster carers which is relevant to the work that they do. The team continue to work to increase the take up of training by foster carers and to provide support groups which meet their needs. They are also encouraged to gain National Vocational Qualifications.

The systems for auditing and quality assurance are not robust. Despite foster carer

assessments being considered by two managers prior to panel, there remain gaps in the information which panel have referred back for further information. File audits are carried out which are largely about the contents of the files rather than quality issues and there is no evidence of monitoring shortfalls. The manager keeps records of allegations, complaints and issues regarding children's care which allows her to monitor practice.

Assessments of foster carers remain variable, although there has been an improvement overall and some staff have received training. This remains an area for development which the service is working on. Foster carer reviews are largely taking place at annual intervals. Placement evaluation questionnaires are sent to all social workers at the end of placements but are often not returned. When they are, there is no overall evaluation of comments in order to improve practice.

A recruitment strategy is in place to target areas of deficit and to provide carers able to meet the needs of children looked after in Tameside. The managers and staff are aware of the needs of children's services and prioritise assessment as necessary. Systems allow for enquirers to speak with a social worker soon after the initial telephone call and to gain more information as they move through the approval process. Promotional material and information leaflets are well produced and provide clear information.

Files are maintained appropriately and stored safely and confidentially. The foster carer recording system has been changed to allow information to go with a young person when they move.

The fostering service has appropriate guidance and policies in regard to kinship care and can demonstrate that these are carried out in practice. Kinship carers have access to support and training and have an allocated worker from the fostering service.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
4	ensure that the systems for auditing and quality control are robust.	01/05/2008

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- clarify the agency's policy on references taken up in respect of potential foster carers (NMS 6)
- maintain individual personnel records for panel members (NMS 15)
- ensure that a system is in place to monitor and revise health and safety assessments and safe caring policies (NMS 6)
- continue to improve the quality of records of supervisory visits (NMS 22)
- continue to encourage foster carers to attend training (NMS 23).